

STRONG NAVAJO MARRIAGES

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study, conducted in two Navajo Nation chapters, was to learn what makes Navajo marriages strong because no research has been done on this topic. Twenty-one Navajo couples (42 individuals) who felt they had strong marriages volunteered to participate in the study. Couples identified the following marital strengths: (1) maintain communication, (2) nurture your relationship, (3) learn about marriage, (4) be prepared for marriage, and (5) have a strong foundation.

Introduction

Interest in relationship and marriage education has increased in recent years, with programs and initiatives serving couples being developed throughout the United States (Larson, 2004). This interest has been prompted by the Administration for Children and Families at the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, which announced the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2001 (Administration for Children and Families). These programs have a goal of increasing marital happiness and decreasing divorce. There is evidence that healthy and stable marriages increase both child well-being (Hoffman & Johnson, 1998; Pong & Ju, 2000) and social and emotional health of individuals in the couple relationship (Burt & Burt, 1996; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Whisman & Bruce, 1999), and also contribute to economic and societal stability (Schramm, 2006; Waite & Gallagher). It is, therefore, important to have healthy couple relationships for the benefit of the entire family and society.

Researchers and family educators have developed premarital and marriage education training, which typically focuses on developing skills in talking to one's partner, managing conflict, and solving problems (Dion, 2005). The need for these skills became apparent as a result of research with European-American couples, and education programs typically serve these same couples. Skills are usually taught in marriage education classes attended by couples, where facilitators teach skills and couples then practice them. These education programs, however, do not attract or meet the needs of diverse populations (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

There is very little understanding of what constitutes effective relationship and marriage education for ethnically diverse couples (Dion, 2005). Researchers have concluded that one size does not necessarily fit all, and that many couples would not benefit from traditional relationship and marriage education because neither the methods nor the content are appropriate for diverse populations (Goddard & Olsen, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Wiley & Ebata, 2004). One study focusing on what makes strong marriages for Latino couples identified children, communication, and religion as essential components (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008). The findings of this study suggest that there are cultural differences between what makes strong marriages for the sample group of Latino couples versus European-American couples.

Research findings indicate that, because of their unique cultural characteristics, it is likely that there is also a need for relationship and marriage education that specifically meets the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. These cultural characteristics, which include the importance of spirituality (Cross, 1998); the need for balance among mind, body, and spirit (Cross); and differences in learning style (Sue & Sue, 2003), point to the need for couple education for AI/AN populations to be different from what is traditionally taught to European-American couples.

Extensive research, including a review of the Native Health Database at the University of New Mexico, revealed no studies about marriage relationships in AI/AN populations. There is a need for research to be conducted within a cultural context to inform programming for AI/AN populations to better understand what makes marriages strong (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Halford, 2004; Wiley & Ebata, 2004). This study is an effort to begin filling the gap in literature about healthy couple relationships in AI/AN populations by focusing on strong marriages within one tribe.

Twenty-one Navajo couples who self-identified as having strong marriages participated in this qualitative study. This research about strong Navajo marriages drew upon the family strengths framework, which focuses on the strengths evident in families, rather than on the reasons why families do not do well (Stinnett, Sanders, & DeFrain, 1981). We sought to understand the cultural values, practices, and strengths evident in these strong marriages, using an interview format that was open-ended and would allow for cultural characteristics to be reflected in the participants' responses. The ultimate goal of this study was to use the findings to provide culturally appropriate marriage education to members of the Navajo community. These findings may have implications for other tribes as well.

Methods

This study was approved by and conducted under the direction of the Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board (NNHRRB). The study was conducted using the model provided by Grills and Rowe (1999), which encourages researchers to become familiar with and develop a value orientation that is respectful of and knowledgeable about the community being investigated. The study was conducted by gathering and analyzing data using qualitative methods, allowing strengths of the Navajo marriages to be described within the context of culture.

The instrument used for gathering data was a semi-structured interview schedule which was based on features and cultural themes about AI/AN family life as described in the literature. The NNHRRB provided feedback about the interview schedule, which was then revised. It ultimately included 25 open-ended questions about marriage focusing on the following issues: how the couple met, their descriptions of strong marriages, qualities of strong marriages in other couples they knew, and what advice they would give to their children about having strong marriages (see Appendix for a complete list of questions). Participants' answers to the questions about strong marriages reflected their personal experiences.

The participants interviewed for this study included 21 couples (42 individuals). Volunteers for the study were solicited through the use of flyers and word of mouth in two northern Chapters of the Navajo Nation. Chapters are the smallest of the governing agencies, similar to counties or precincts. There are 110 Navajo Nation Chapters; the two Chapters where the study was conducted are on or near the Utah/Arizona border. Because flyers were posted at Chapter houses and the

request for volunteers was announced at Chapter meetings, couples who frequented these government entities were most likely to know about the study. However, some couples volunteered because they heard about the study by word of mouth. The couples who participated in the study could choose a gift certificate in the amount of \$50 to a local restaurant or grocery store.

Marital partners were interviewed separately in a location the couples indicated was convenient for them. All the couples chose to be interviewed in their own homes. The average interview lasted approximately 30 minutes per person. Participants could choose to have the interview conducted in English or in Navajo, and interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were transcribed, and when translation was required, they were translated by a bilingual, Navajo-speaking transcriber. All the transcribed interviews were sent to participants to verify that the transcription was accurate. Demographic data that might affect marriage relationships, such as length of marriage, age at marriage, educational level, and number of children, were also collected from each couple.

All couples lived on or near the Navajo Nation and were affiliated with one of two northern Chapters. Both the husband and wife identified as Navajo in all couples, except for one couple that was Navajo/European-American and one that was Navajo/Mexican. The average age of the husbands was 49 years and the average age of the wives was 47 years, with the youngest participant being 29 years and the oldest being 74 years. Both husbands and wives had completed an average of two years of community college; participants' education ranged from having no formal education to having completed graduate school. Income level was not tabulated because this information was optional and many participants did not state their income (see Table 1).

Table 1
Sample Individual Characteristics

Characteristic	Husband	Mean	Wife	Mean
Age		49		47
29 years	0		1	
30-39 years	5		5	
40-49 years	6		6	
50-59 years	6		6	
60-69 years	3		3	
74 years	1		0	
Education				
No formal education	1		2	
8 th Grade	1		0	
High School	4		4	
Technical School	2		1	
Community College	5		4	
Four-year College	6		4	
Graduate School	2		6	

All of the couples had at least two children. One couple considered themselves married even though they had never been legally married; the average length of time married for the other 20 couples was 25.6 years, with the range being 5 years to 53 years (see Table 2).

Table 2
Sample Marital Characteristics

Characteristic	Sample	Mean
Race/Ethnicity		
Navajo-Navajo	19	
Navajo-Mexican	1	
Navajo-European American	1	
Length of Marriage ^a		25.6
5 years	1	
10-19 years	5	
20-29 years	5	
30-39 years	6	
40-49 years	2	
53 years	1	

^aDoes not include one couple who had a common-law marriage

Data were analyzed using the procedure described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003); researchers identified coding categories in answer to the research question: What makes strong marriages for these Navajo couples? All three of the researchers immersed themselves in the data, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen, by reading the transcriptions from all 42 participants twice in order to get a sense of the totality of the information. The researchers then re-read the data a third time and

developed coding categories that reflected the patterns and themes described by the respondents, focusing on what participants said was necessary to have a strong marriage.

The coding was done independently by each of the three researchers, and the coding schemes were then shared. When differences in the coding categories were identified, the researchers went back to the data and developed a consensus about which categories best reflected the participants' responses. Throughout this process, coding categories were collapsed and refined. Final coding categories were then used to code all data. The resulting categories were shared with a Navajo consultant to verify that researchers accurately understood the findings. The findings in this paper reflect coding categories that were cited by the largest number of respondents as being necessary components of strong marriages: maintaining communication, nurturing your relationship, learning about marriage, being prepared for marriage, and having a strong foundation.

Results

Maintain Communication

All 42 participants in the study told researchers that maintaining communication was a vital part of building strong marriages. Couples agreed that effective communication between partners was hard work that did not come easily. To maintain effective communication, couples needed to be open with each other, listen to each other, be positive, and praise each other. When couples did not communicate well, there was stress in their marriages. Individuals in the study mentioned the need for communication multiple times. Many stressed that it was the most important skill in building strong marriages.

Be Open with Each Other

Being able to talk to one's spouse about anything was seen as important in being able to communicate effectively. "Openness" meant being able to talk to one's spouse about past as well as current issues. Keeping secrets from each other had a negative impact on marriage relationships. Being open also contributed to trusting each other.

Listen to Each Other

Couples said that if marriage partners did not listen to each other, their marriages would suffer because communication involves both talking and listening. Listening to each other included finding out what the other person really meant, rather than jumping to conclusions:

Sometimes we were both talking about the same thing and we both basically agreed on something, but we were looking at it from different perspectives culturally. When we had time to sit down and talk about it, we realized that we really didn't disagree.

Be Positive

When couples had difficulties with issues in their marriages, staying positive helped them work through problems more easily. Couples who worked at having positive feelings toward each other, and talked positively to each other, felt that these strategies had a positive effect on their ability to communicate. One man described the importance of staying positive:

It's how you think about each other, how you love one another, how you work together, and how you make decisions. That's all part of having a good marriage. To have just good thoughts for one another and talk positively to each other—that makes a strong marriage.

Give Praise to Each Other

Praise was viewed as an expression of love and acceptance, and it promoted positive feelings between partners. When both spouses felt accepted and loved, they were better able to communicate effectively.

Nurture Your Relationship

All but one of the 42 individuals told researchers that couples needed to nurture their relationships in order to have strong and successful marriages. When couples took time to do so, they were fortifying their marriages and safeguarding them against times of difficulty. To nurture their relationships, couples needed to be committed, focus on each other, and learn to enjoy being together.

Be Committed

Couples stressed that being committed strengthened their marriages as they went through good times and bad. When a couple experienced hardships, they had the choice to draw closer together and work through them, or to give up. Couples who remained committed despite difficulties were able to build strong marriages. Each spouse had to make a choice to be committed to marriage. Specific qualities that individuals used to strengthen their commitment to each other were unselfishness, patience, and understanding.

Focus on Each Other

Another important way for couples to nurture their marriages was to nurture each other as individuals. When a person focused on the needs of his or her spouse, the marriage was stronger. Nurturing included respect, support, and love.

Learn to Enjoy Marriage

Participants stated that marriage takes hard work and commitment, but couples also needed to have fun, laugh, and enjoy time together. Friendship between spouses was an important part of strong marriages. Marriages were strengthened when couples did things together that both spouses enjoyed, like friends do. When the excitement of romance faded, there was still a strong friendship to fall back on that helped to maintain the marriage. Couples also indicated that it was important to have a sense of humor and to be able to laugh with each other. Teasing each other lightened up tense situations and restored positive feelings in the marriage.

Learn About Marriage

All but 2 of the 42 individuals who participated in this study told researchers that being open to learning about marriage was an important component of strong marriages. Couples who learned from others and from their own experience had stronger marriages. Participants told researchers that learning from others was an important way to gain knowledge and information about what made marriages work. To learn about marriage, couples needed to receive advice and counsel from family members, observe other couples, and learn from spiritual leaders and counselors, each other, and personal experience.

Receive Advice and Counsel from Family Members

Family members were an important source of knowledge about marriage for Navajo couples. Family members offered advice and also shared traditional stories—stories that taught values and provided guidance in addressing issues in marriage. For example, family members taught couples about traditional roles and responsibilities within marriage. This is what one woman learned about marriage: “My mother used to talk to me, and my grandmother used to tell me what your roles are—what your duties are as a wife.”

Observe Other Couples

Observing other couples who had difficulties helped couples to avoid the same problems in their marriages. At the same time, observing successful marriages also helped couples learn what they could do to have strong marriages. Couples also mentioned that they tried to be good examples for their own children in teaching them about having good marriages.

Learn from Spiritual Leaders and Counselors

Couples reported that using spiritual resources helped them have strong marriages. Couples reported turning to churches, learning from religious leaders, and involving themselves in personal Bible study. Religious teachings provided a set of values and standards to live by, and when couples agreed upon and abided by those values, their marriages were strengthened. Spirituality also included traditional teachings and ceremonies. When a couple was having struggles in their marriage, they had prayers or blessings done, or counseled with a medicine man to give them advice, strength, and direction. One man said, “The medicine man has very good advice. If you go to them they will talk to you and are very compassionate. They’re medicine men and that’s what they’re trained to do.”

Couples indicated that seeking professional counseling was one way to resolve differences and learn how to have strong marriages. Through counseling, couples could identify their strengths and weaknesses and learn important skills to build on those strengths and overcome their weaknesses. Counseling was not necessarily limited to marriage counselors. Many Navajo couples received helpful advice from counselors in schools, from elders, and from other trusted people.

Learn from Each Other

Couples in the study said they learned from each other about how to have strong marriages. Participants described being open to learning from their spouses. Their spouses might have had more knowledge or might have been older and more mature when they got married. According to one woman:

I think my husband was more ready than I was because I was much younger and he was a little more mature at the time . . . I learned so much from him throughout my young years after we got married.

Learning from each other involved having an openness to learn as a couple and accept the influence of a spouse throughout married life. One woman concluded, "You could take all the classes on marriage to be ready for marriage, but I think it's between you and your spouse."

Learn from Personal Experience

When asked how he learned how to have a strong marriage, one man simply said, "I think through experience, that's how I learned." Every person had many experiences in his or her lifetime that taught different lessons, and these lessons were used to strengthen their marriages. Some participants had been married previously and divorced. They learned from mistakes in failed marriages and explained that they did not make the same mistakes in their current marriages. Others who had always been married to the same person also made mistakes, and they tried to learn from those mistakes and not repeat them as time progressed.

Be Prepared for Marriage

All but 2 of the 42 participants told researchers that being prepared for marriage was an essential part of building strong and successful marriages. Spouses needed to be prepared individually, both educationally and financially, and also needed to have a plan as a couple.

Be Prepared as an individual

Being prepared as an individual was an important part of preparation for marriage. This included establishing oneself as an independent adult before marriage. Becoming an independent adult and being able to live on one's own was an important preparation for

marriage, and it demonstrated responsibility. Couples felt that it was important for partners to be prepared to take care of themselves when a spouse was not there—this applied to both men and women. Individual preparation also included having knowledge of both traditional Navajo ways and “modern” ways. Individual preparation also included knowing what one wanted out of life. Having made these decisions before marriage helped Navajo couples have stronger marriages. One woman described how she had decided what kind of man she wanted to marry:

I had already made some choices as to what kind of guy I wanted to marry. I wanted to marry a guy that didn't abuse alcohol. I wanted a guy who was serious about having a family, and had a good belief in God, and just had a really good family base. Be prepared educationally and financially.

Navajo couples also said getting an education and establishing oneself financially before marriage helped couples have stronger marriages. This preparation helped couples avoid, as one person said, “going through waiting in line for food stamps, waiting in line for government help.”

Have a Plan as a Couple

Having a plan was important to Navajo couples for many reasons. It gave couples a common goal to work toward, which brought unity to the marriage. Having goals and plans helped individuals and couples have a sense of control over their lives and to take an active role in shaping their future. Having a plan included establishing goals as a couple, making conscious decisions to treat one's spouse with respect, and planning how to deal with conflict when it arose. Navajo couples said that learning to agree on decisions was an important part of strong marriages, specifically with regard to traditional roles and parenting.

Several Navajo couples said that each person should gain the skills necessary to carry out his or her traditional roles. For women, that meant cleaning, cooking, and raising the children as part of their role as wife. Men would provide for the family and take care of traditional male roles, such as building a house or taking care of the family's physical needs.

Couples emphasized that preparing ahead of time for parenthood was also important. Couples should consider the expense of raising children before rushing into parenthood. Parents should discuss and agree upon what kind of values they wanted to teach their children and be prepared personally to deal with the demands of parenthood. Those who had children before they were married, or got married because they had children, learned through difficult experience the things others learned through preparation.

Have a Strong Foundation

Thirty-two out of 42 participants told researchers that building a strong foundation for marriage was crucial for marital success. Much like the foundation of a house supports the rest of the structure, a strong foundation in marriage contributes to the overall strength of the marriage. To have a strong foundation, couples needed to have personal and shared values and goals.

According to couples, before two people could be strong as a couple they had to be strong as individuals. Strong individuals had strong values. When each member of the couple had strong personal values, they brought that strength to the relationship. Values included strong spiritual beliefs, strong traditional beliefs, living a good life in general, and being secure with oneself and having self-respect. One husband said:

I think one of the things that I would encourage is to have good, strong values yourself. In Navajo culture they talk about values, about how to live a good life, and how to be good to others—and things along those lines. I think that if they were to follow those values and really live those values and teachings, there are a lot of good things about it.

Participants said marriages were strengthened, and there was less conflict, when couples had similar values, especially concerning religion and traditional values. For example, couples said that practices and beliefs unique to the Navajo culture served as a strength to those who followed them. Traditional beliefs passed down through generations made families stronger. One man shared this example:

Well, I have seen couples, older, elderly couples to this day that are married. They have a strong foundation through maintaining their traditional belief with livestock, and with the cornfield, and the traditional Hogan—I see these people live for a long time. Where people live outside with luxury and all these things, marriage don't last that long. So I guess, in that instance, you need to practice your traditional, your cultural upbringing for a long marriage.

Having goals as a couple was a way of focusing priorities and putting values into practice, so discussing goals was necessary to ensure that couples were working toward the same things. Couples who had similar cultural backgrounds were more likely to have the same goals. Two people in the study who came from very different backgrounds found it more difficult to have the same goals as their respective spouses. Each person established goals based on their background and experience, which sometimes caused difficulties in having similar goals for those who married someone from a different race, religion, or ethnicity.

Conclusions and Implications

For the 21 participating couples, five themes emerged from the data that were important in maintaining strong marriages: maintaining communication, nurturing the relationship, learning about marriage, being prepared for marriage, and having a strong foundation. The findings of this study, as compared to studies involving European-American and Latino couples, indicate that, although there are similarities in what makes strong marriages (such as communication), there were also differences. These themes are slightly different from skills taught in traditional relationship and couple education, which is based upon research conducted with European-American couples and which typically includes talking to each other (communication), conflict management, and problem-solving (Dion, 2005). In addition, the components identified by these 21 Navajo couples also differ from components identified by Latino couples, which include having children, communication, and religion (Skogrand et al., 2008). It is proposed that these differences are based upon culture and that effective relationship and marriage education should look different for differing cultures.

The findings from this study have been used to develop a couple activity book for Navajo couples who are in a relationship or are married. The activity book provides information about the five components of strong marriages and a survey whereby couples can assess their own relationship based upon these components. A list of activities designed to enhance each of the five components is also provided in the activity book. This book was developed with the help of a consultant in traditional Navajo ways, and the assessment tool and activities incorporate aspects of Navajo culture.

These findings could also be used to create a curriculum that would be taught to a group of Navajo couples, which would allow for discussion and learning among couples. Findings could be adapted and taught to high school-age youth, focusing on preparation for relationships and marriage. Counselors or therapists might also use the information to help couples who are working towards strengthening their relationships or marriages.

This study was an initial effort in understanding components of strong marriages of a limited number of couples in two northern Chapters of the Navajo Nation, in order that culturally appropriate relationship and marriage education might be provided. The Navajo Nation covers a very large geographical area—27,000 square miles—and is larger than 10 of the 50 states. Although this study included volunteers from two northern Chapters, there are 110 governing Chapters on the Navajo Nation, representing various regions. Because of differences in the degree of traditional practice on the Navajo Nation, components of strong marriages may vary even within the Navajo Nation, depending on geographic location. It is unknown if findings from this study have implications for relationship and marriage education for other AI/AN tribes, because tribal cultures vary. It is hoped that other studies might be conducted in other Chapters of the Navajo Nation and with other tribes to determine if these findings might have overlap or be consistent with what makes strong marriages in other AI/AN populations.

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Appendix
Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about how you and your spouse met.
2. What was one of the best times you had when you began to see each other?
3. What made you decide to get married?
4. In your opinion what are the reasons for getting married?
5. Before you got married did you ever get good advice about marriage from other people? If so, what was that advice?
6. Did family members affect your decision to marry? Explain.
7. What are some of the things you did, personally, to prepare for getting married?
8. How did you learn what it takes to have a strong marriage?
9. How have family members outside of your immediate family affected your marriage?
10. How have relationships with friends affected your marriage?
11. What was a good time in your marriage? Please tell a story about that.
12. How are decisions made in your marriage?
13. What kinds of things could lead to difficulties in marriage?
14. What is advice that you would give to others about overcoming difficulties?
15. What are your feelings about having children?
16. How have children affected your marriage?
17. How would you describe a strong marriage? What does a strong marriage look like?
18. What does it take to make a marriage work?
19. What advice would you give your children about how to have a strong marriage?
20. What would be the most useful in helping Navajo couples *prepare* for marriage?
21. For couples who are already married, what would be the most useful in supporting Navajo couples to *continue* to have strong marriages?
22. How can we help couples who are having struggles in their marriages?
23. If education about marriage were provided for Navajo people, what should we teach and how should it be taught?
24. Is there anything about strong marriages that you would like to add?
25. Is there anything about this study that you would like to ask me about?